

< Russian Cyberattack Targeted Elections Vendor Tied To Voting Day Disruptions

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ARI SHAPIRO, HOST:

Back in November, when voters showed up in several North Carolina precincts, weird things started to happen. They involved the electronic devices called poll books that were being used to check voters in. It was later revealed that the company that provided those poll books was the target of a Russian phishing attack. There's no evidence that the two incidents are linked. Nine months later, officials are still trying to sort out the details. And as NPR's Pam Fessler reports, what happened in North Carolina exposed serious gaps in efforts to protect U.S. elections.

PAM FESSLER, BYLINE: Polls in Durham County, N.C. opened at 6:30 a.m. on Election Day. And almost immediately, complaints started pouring in to a nonpartisan hotline.

ALLISON RIGGS: Voters were going in and being told that they had already voted, and they hadn't.

FESSLER: Allison Riggs, an attorney with the Southern Coalition for Social Justice, was manning the phones. She says poll books also indicated that voters had to show ID when they didn't. Alarmed, she contacted election officials to find out what was going on.

DEREK BOWENS: We had roughly six precincts call and report computer-related issues.

FESSLER: Durham County Elections Director Derek Bowens says the problems appeared to be confined to a few laptops, which are used to run software listing voters' registration data, so the county decided to switch to paper poll books in those precincts just to be safe.

BOWENS: And then the state got involved and determined that it would be better to have uniformity across all of our 57 precincts. And we went paper poll books across the county.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER: The big news at this hour - eight Durham precincts extending voting hours; some as little as 15 minutes, others extending a full hour to 8:30.

FESSLER: But as the local ABC affiliate and other news outlets reported, that move created a whole new set of problems in a key battleground state. Switching to paper poll books delayed voting in some precincts up to an hour and a half as poll workers waited for supplies. They now had to cut voters' names from the poll books and attach them to forms before handing out ballots.

RIGGS: Precincts didn't have scissors. They didn't have tape. They didn't have glue sticks.

FESSLER: As far as Riggs was concerned, the solution was worse than the problem. The state had overreacted. But Susan Greenhalgh was worried that people were underreacting. She's with Verified Voting, an election security group, and was monitoring events in Durham County. Mid-morning she noticed a news report that the electronic poll

books were supplied by a Florida company named VR Systems.

SUSAN GREENHALGH: My stomach just dropped.

FESSLER: She knew that in September, the FBI had warned Florida election officials that Russians tried to hack the computers of a local contractor. VR Systems was rumored to be that company.

GREENHALGH: I became really concerned that this might be a cyberattack or some sort of cyber event.

FESSLER: But she had trouble getting anyone's attention. Greenhalgh says a contact at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security was also concerned, but said there was little that the feds could do unless the state requested help. And here's where the problem comes in. On Election Day, North Carolina didn't know that VR Systems had been the target of a Russian attack.

JOSH LAWSON: We found out like everybody else did.

FESSLER: Josh Lawson is general counsel for the state board of elections. He says they only learned of the hack attempt this June, when an online news site published a classified report that Russia had tried to break into VR Systems' computers last year and that the hackers sent local election offices emails that appeared to come from the company but contained malicious software. Lawson says there's no evidence that anyone in the state received those emails. But he adds...

LAWSON: It's our job to be paranoid about this. And so when you have a leaked memorandum indicating that there may have been a vulnerability about which you were not aware at the time, you're going to want to try to confirm that there was no actual interference.

FESSLER: Now, nine months later, the state is investigating what happened in Durham County.

BOWENS: So as you can see, we got a lot under lock and key here.

FESSLER: County Elections Director Derek Bowens says voters should be confident the election was secure and their votes were never at risk.

BOWENS: So these are some of our laptops. We've got several more over here.

FESSLER: The county conducted its own investigation last November and concluded that VR System software didn't fail but that some poll books weren't updated, so they displayed outdated voter information.

BOWENS: The conclusion was - is that it was administrative errors that caused the issues on Election Day.

FESSLER: And that may very well be the case. Still, the episode has left everyone frustrated, wondering what would happen if there was an attack. VR Systems told NPR it warned customers to be on the lookout for fake emails, but it's not clear how widely that information was shared. And Lawson of the state board says intelligence agencies still haven't confirmed whether Russia tried to hack into any of North Carolina's election systems. Matt Masterson, who chairs the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, says federal authorities have to communicate better.

MATT MASTERSON: As information has come out in various media reports, election officials, I think fairly, have said, you know, why are we reading about this? Why has no one shared this information with us?

FESSLER: He says that's what state and federal authorities are trying to work out now - deciding who gets what intelligence and when. And there's a sense of urgency because everyone expects the Russian hackers will be back. Pam Fessler, NPR News.

[POST-BROADCAST CLARIFICATION: In the audio of this story, as well as an earlier Web version, we report that Susan Greenhalgh "knew that in September, the FBI had warned Florida election officials that Russians had tried to

hack one of their vendor's computers." Greenhalgh's information was based on several news reports last fall and a discussion she had with one of the local election officials who participated in the call with the FBI. A spokeswoman for the Florida Department of State, which manages elections in the state, says there was "an informational call with the FBI ... where they alerted officials for the need to maintain security measures, but there was no indication of a Florida-specific issue."]

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